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ABSTRACT

Women who won National Merit Scholarships during the years 1956 through 1960 were followed up in 1965 to determine their marriage and/or career plans. Each of the 883 women was classified into one of five groups: (1) marriage only, (2) marriage with deferred career, (3) marriage with immediate career, (4) career only, and (5) uncertain. The educational and career field aspirations of these groups differed; and those seeking an immediate career scored higher on scholastic ability tests than those who either planned no career or who planned to delay entering them. The groups also differed in their willingness to express problems encountered in making and implementing their plans and problems experienced because of being a woman. (Author)

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Donivan J. Watley

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NATIONAL MERIT SCHOLARSHIP CORPORATION

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John M. Stalnaker, President

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Abstract

Women who won National Merit Scholarships during the years 1956 through 1960 were followed up in 1965 to determine their marriage and/or career plans. Each of the 883 women was classified into one of five groups: marriage only, marriage with deferred career, marriage with immediate career, career only, or uncertain. The educational and career field aspirations of these groups differed; and those seeking an immediate career scored higher on scholastic ability tests than those who either planned no career or who planned to delay entering them. The groups also differed in their willingness to express problems encountered in making and implementing their plans and problems experienced because of being a woman.

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CAREER OR MARRIAGE?: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF ABLE YOUNG WOMEN

Donivan J. Watley

Highly intelligent women in our society generally go to college, do well academically, and develop considerable knowledge and skill in many different areas. It has not been traditional, however, for women, as it has been for men, to move from college into productive and satisfying career roles.

Even at the highest levels of intelligence, most women do not pursue careers. Terman's well-known longitudinal study, started in the early 1920's, included 671 women with an average IQ of 150; when these women were in their mid-forties Terman and Oden (1959) reported that: fewer than one-half are employed outside the home and "for most, a career is not of primary importance." They also observed that:

> "the accomplishments of the gifted women do not compare with those of the men. This is not surprising since it follows the cultural pattern to which most of the gifted women as well as women in general have succumbed. Not only may job success interfere with marriage success, but women who do seek a career outside the home have to break through many more barriers and overcome many more obstacles than do men on the road to success. Although the gifted women equalled or excelled the men in school achievement from the first grade through college, after school days were over the great majority ceased to compete with men in the world's work. This characteristic appears to be due to lack of motivation and opportunity rather than to lack of ability" (Terman and Oden, 1959, p. 106).

In reviewing research on gifted women reported by Ginzberg, et al. (1966) and Mattfield and Van Aken (1967), McCormack (1967) reached conclusions similar to those of Terman and Oden. Commenting on the general life patterns found among talented women, she stated that:

> "the overall impression is of a group of women who are intelligent, rarely intellectual; competent, rarely creative; performing necessary and useful services, rarely critical. They are in every sense of the word--socially, intellectually, and economically--underemployed" (McCormack, 1967, p. 118).

This study focused on the marriage and career plans of able women who were winners of National Merit Scholarships. Since 1956 the National Merit Scholarship

Corporation has conducted an annual talent search to identify and honor the nation's most intellectually able high school graduates. Selected without regard to sex, these students generally score within the top one percent on tested scholastic aptitude. The primary aim of a Merit Scholarship is to enable its recipient to obtain an undergraduate education.

Women scholarship winners during the years 1956 to 1960 were followed up in 1965 to determine their marriage and/or career plans. Therefore, five to nine years had elapsed when the followup was conducted, depending on the year college was initially entered. Women with plans of different types were asked to indicate the highest level of education they sought; and of those seeking careers, an attempt was made to learn which fields they planned to enter. All Scholars were asked to indicate major conflicts they had encountered in making and implementing their marriage and/or career plans. They were also asked to reveal problems experienced <u>because</u> they were women.

Method

Sample

The National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (NMSQT) is administered on a voluntary basis to juniors in high schools that enroll approximately 95 percent of all eleventh-grade students in the United States. Students who score in approximately the top one percent of each state are selected as Semifinalists. The Semifinalists who are endorsed by their schools and whose high scores are verified by a second test--the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) of the College Entrance Examination Board--become Merit Finalists. Finally, a selection committee and scholarship sponsors use high school records, recommendations, and test scores to select the Merit Scholars for each state.

Women who obtained Merit Scholarships during 1956 to 1960 were included in this study. A total of 1,079 received scholarships during this period; 152 were given in 1956, 216 in 1957, 278 in 1958, 219 in 1959, and 214 in 1960.

Followup Questionnaire

A questionnaire was mailed during the summer of 1965 to recipients of Merit Scholarships during 1956 to 1960. Of the 1,079 women who were sent questionnaires, usable responses were obtained from 883 (about 82 percent). Usable information was not obtained, however, for all items.

Concerning the marriage and/or career plans of women Scholars, the following question was asked:

> "There has been much concern recently about the proper role for talented women. Some contributors to the discussion emphasize the importance of being a mother and homemaker, others stress work and a career, and still others maintain that these aspects of life need not conflict. What are your own plans for family life, work, or both?"

Based on the responses obtained, each woman Scholar was placed into one of five categories: marriage only, marriage with deferred career, marriage with immediate career, career only, or uncertain.

In attempting to learn about the problems encountered in making and implementing their marriage and/or career plans, this question was asked:

> "Have you had difficulty in making your marriage or career plans, or in carrying them out? What, if any, relevant special problems or satisfactions do you anticipate? Please be as specific as you can in your answers."

The information obtained was coded and classified into the following major problem types: (1) not aiming high enough, (2) difficulty finding a husband, (3) hindered because of husband's job location, (4) decreased or lack of career ambition, (5) frustration from being pulled in several directions, (6) difficulty in obtaining part-time employment or part-time graduate work, (7) unfair competition with males, (8) keeping up with knowledge in major area or career field. The problems reported here are those which were either described as "major" by the woman Scholar or appeared to independent readers to be highly important to the person describing it. A distinction was necessary between "major" and "minor" problems because some of the women described only their "major" problems while others mentioned problems they considered both "major" or "minor." To be

consistent, only the "major" problems are reported here. This information has relevance only to the extent that it provides clues about some of the more important problems they have encountered that they are willing to reveal.

This question was asked to get information about the problems experienced because of being a woman:

> "In pursuing your intellectual goals have you encountered any special problems, advantages, or disadvantages because you are a woman?"

The responses were coded into problems of these types: discrimination because of sex, internal conflict over feminine-masculine role, and insufficient time--drawn in too many directions; a separate category was made to include the comments of those who attributed advantages to being a woman. Only those responses were coded that appeared to be of major importance.

The Scholars were asked to indicate their career field plans. Because of the relatively small number of women involved, Scholars' plans were classified into these broad career fields: (1) physics, (2) other physical sciences (e.g., astronomy, chemistry, geology, metallurgy, meteorology); (3) mathematics; (4) biological sciences (e.g., anatomy, biology, botany, pharmacology, physiology, zoology); (5) social sciences (e.g., anthropology, economics); (6) sociology, social work, psychology; (7) humanities and fine arts; (8) education--elementary and secondary; (9) English; (10) medicine; (11) law; (12) Business; (13) other (i.e., those not classified in another career field; (14) housewife; and (15) undecided.

Scholar's precollege career plans were also available. This information was collected as part of the Merit Scholar selection process. Thus it was possible to compare Scholars' initial career choices with their plans at the time of the followup.

In addition to initial career plans, each Scholar was asked to indicate any changes in her choice after entering college. A rough validity check was possible

for the responses obtained. During their undergraduate years, Scholars are annually asked to provide information about their educational progress, and whether there were changes in their career objectives. The information obtained on the followup questionnaire was compared with the "changes in career objective" data already in the National Merit files for a five percent sample. The information provided on the followup questionnaire was generally quite similar to that listed on the annual reports. The number of career field choices were counted for each Scholar.

In addition, they were asked:

> "If you had to do it over, would you choose a different career field from the one you now see yourself pursuing?" (yes or no)

The following information was obtained from the married Scholars: age at marriage, number of children (including current pregnancy) and husband's education.

Results

Marriage and/or Career Plans

Each woman's plans was classified into one of these groups: marriage only, marriage with career deferred, marriage with immediate career, career only, or uncertain. Table 1 shows the proportions of women in each category.

Table 1

Marriage and/or Career Plans of 1956-1960 Female National Merit Scholars

Plans	Number	Percent
Marriage Only	76	8.6
Marriage & Deferred Career	289	32.8
Marriage & Immediate Career	410	46.4
Career Only	53	6.0
Uncertain	55	6.2
Total Number	883	100.0

Almost one-half (46 percent) planned marriage and an immediate career. Altogether, 85 percent indicated that they planned to pursue a career.

The emphasis here is on plans and not on Scholars' actual status. Although many were already actively carrying out their stated plans, some were not. Thus, planned status should provide a clearer picture of their intentions than actual status.

It is worthwhile to consider information for those married by the time this followup was conducted. For example, 95 percent of those with "marriage only" plans were already married. In contrast, fewer proportions of those planning to combine marriage and career were married: 80 percent with marriage and deferred career plans were married, and 65 percent desiring marriage and an immediate career were already married. Thus, plans were related to their actual marital status.

Of those who expressed uncertainty about their plans, only 27 percent were already married. Thus, "uncertainty" seemed to include both the marriage only versus career only question as well as the question of whether or not a combination of marriage and career might work better.

The median age at marriage was 22 for women in the "marriage only," "marriage with career deferred," and "uncertain" groups. For those combining marriage with an immediate career, the median age at marriage was 23.

The number of children belonging to women in the various groups are given in Table 2. Many of the married women in each group had no children. Almost 50 percent of those in the "marriage only" and "marriage with deferred careers" groups reported having no children. Thus, in many cases, plans were not affected by the presence of children. Almost one-third of the married Scholars in the marriage-immediate career group planned immediate career employment despite the presence of children in their homes.

Husbands' education of women with different plans is shown in Table 3. The conclusion suggested is that husband's education is not differentially related to the plans of woman Scholars. For example, 65 to 75 percent of the women in each of the four groups had husbands with more than a baccalaureate degree.

Table 2

Percentages of Married Women with Various Marriage and/or Career Plans who have Different Numbers of Children

Number of Children	Plans: Marriage Only	Marriage & Deferred Career	Marriage & Immediate Career	Uncertain	% of Total
None	48.6	47.8	68.2	80.0	58.0
1	20.8	25.7	20.6	13.3	22.4
2	25.0	20.9	9.0	6.7	15.6
3	2.8	3.9	1.1	--	2.4
4	--	0.4	--	--	0.2
No response	2.8	1.3	1.1	--	1.4
Total Married	72	230	267	15	584

Table 3

Percentage of Married Women Scholars with Various Marriage and/or Career Plans whose Husbands have Completed Different Levels of Education

Husbands Education	Plans: Marriage only	Marriage & Deferred Career	Marriage & Immediate Career	Uncertain	% of Total
Grade School	--	--	0.4	--	0.2
Some High School	2.7	--	0.7	6.7	0.9
High School Graduate	4.1	0.4	2.6	6.7	2.1
Voc./Bus. College	--	0.4	0.4	--	0.3
College, No Degree	8.2	9.1	9.0	6.7	8.9
Bachelor's Degree	19.2	20.0	11.0	6.6	15.4
Some Graduate Work	27.4	21.3	22.4	33.3	22.9
Master's Degree	19.2	26.7	27.7	20.0	25.6
PhD or Equivalent	17.8	21.3	22.8	20.0	21.5
No response	1.4	1.8	3.0	--	2.2
Total Married	73	230	267	15	585

Although the process by which these women were selected insured considerable homogeneity on tested scholastic ability, it is relevant to determine whether mean test score differences existed among those with different plans. The mean SAT-Verbal and SAT-Mathematic scores for the various groups are shown in Table 4. The means for each ability measure differed among those with different plans. Most notable perhaps are the differences between women who planned marriage only or marriage with a deferred career versus those who planned a career only or marriage with an immediate career; those planning an immediate career scored higher on the

Table 4

SAT-Verbal and SAT-Mathematics Means and Standard Deviations for Women with Different Marriage and/or Career Plans

		SAT-Verbal		SAT-Mathematics	
Plans	N	M	S.D.	M	S.D.
Marriage Only	76	693.4	51.4	670.4	77.2
Marriage & deferred Career	288	695.3	48.5	678.2	65.2
Marriage & Immediate Career	408	711.3	44.9	687.7	69.3
Career Only	53	706.7	42.4	685.7	64.1
Uncertain	55	718.4	41.2	700.1	63.1

average than those who either planned no career or who planned to delay entering them. The mean difference of 15.4 between these combined groups on SAT-Verbal is highly significant (<.001), and the 10.9 mean difference on SAT-Mathematics is significant at the .05 level.

Educational and Career Field Aspirations

Results for the highest degree planned by women in the various groups are given in Table 5.

Table 5

Percentages of Women Scholars with Various Marriage and/or Career Plans who Aspire to Different Educational Degrees

		Highest Level of Education Aspired						
Plans	N	Less than Bachelor's	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD	LLB	MD	Other
Marriage Only	76	8.2	40.8	46.9	4.1	--	--	--
Marriage & Deferred Career	289	1.1	20.6	51.1	22.8	2.8	1.1	0.6
Marriage & Immediate Career	410	1.1	11.2	37.1	38.2	1.5	6.7	4.1
Career Only	53	--	9.0	33.3	54.5	--	--	3.0
Uncertain	55	3.4	10.3	34.5	48.3	--	--	3.4

These results suggest that amount of education desired is related to marriage and/or career plans. In general, those who wanted careers sought more education than those who planned no career, and those who planned immediate careers sought

more education than those planning to delay them. For example, whereas 51 percent of the women who planned marriage but no career sought a Master's degree or higher, 91 percent desiring careers only sought at least a Master's degree. Since many of those planning careers, particularly those desiring to begin them immediately, sought doctoral level training, it may be inferred that they expected to enter the job market seeking jobs commensurate with their intellectual capabilities.

The career fields selected when these women entered college and the ones they actually entered or expected to enter are shown in Table 6. Considerable shifting occurred among the various fields. Education and "other" professions were the biggest losers from initial to final choices, regardless of group. With the exception of the "marriage only" group, where "housewife" gained from all the career fields, the humanities and fine arts field was the biggest gainer of talent in the other four marriage and/or career groups.

Almost one-half (49 percent) of those who planned a "career only" wanted

Table 6

Percentages of Women Scholars with Various Marriage and/or Career Plans who had Initial and Final Career Field Plans

Career Field	Plans									
	Marriage Only		Marriage & Deferred Career		Marriage & Immediate Career		Career Only		Uncertain	
	Initial	Final	Initial	Final	Initial	Final	Initial	Final	Initial	Final
Physical Science	9.3	--	8.3	6.6	11.2	4.5	7.5	7.5	21.8	3.6
Physics	1.3	--	4.2	1.0	4.7	1.7	5.7	5.7	3.6	3.6
Mathematics	6.7	--	4.5	5.6	7.0	9.2	1.9	3.8	7.3	5.5
Biological Science	2.7	--	1.0	3.1	2.7	5.2	3.8	5.7	1.8	12.7
Social Science	--	--	1.0	0.7	0.5	3.5	--	--	--	--
Sociology, Social work, Psychology	1.3	--	3.5	4.2	2.7	8.0	3.8	7.5	1.8	1.8
Humanities, Fine Arts	6.7	--	2.8	13.5	6.0	27.4	5.7	24.5	--	16.4
Education	37.3	--	37.5	24.0	31.1	11.2	41.5	3.8	21.8	5.5
English	1.3	--	1.4	--	1.5	0.2	--	1.9	1.8	--
Medicine	4.1	--	6.3	1.4	7.5	7.2	7.5	1.9	7.3	--
Law	1.3	--	1.0	2.1	1.0	1.7	--	--	--	1.8
Business	1.3	--	1.4	0.7	2.5	1.7	1.9	--	--	1.8
Other professions	21.4	--	21.9	9.4	16.6	8.5	17.0	24.5	18.2	7.3
Housewife	--	100.0	0.3	16.3	0.8	2.5	--	--	--	3.6
Undecided	5.3	--	4.9	11.4	4.2	7.5	3.8	13.2	14.5	36.4
Total number	75		288		402		53		55	

careers in the humanities-fine arts and "other" fields. Almost none sought careers in the social sciences, medicine, law, business, and education fields.

The humanities-fine arts field was the most frequently chosen "final" career field by women who planned to combine marriage with an immediate career; and, in contrast with the "career only" group 22 percent sought careers in the education, medicine, law, and business fields. Thus, their career preferences tended slightly more toward the traditional types than women who planned a career only.

About one-fourth of the women planning to defer their careers indicated that they expected to enter the field of education. This is a considerably larger proportion than was found for women planning immediate careers.

The number of career field choices after entering college was counted for each woman. In making this count, "undecided" or "housewife" was not included. Interpretative confusion would have resulted from counting "housewife" as an occupational field, particularly for those combining marriage with a career.

It might be expected that women in the "marriage only" and "marriage with deferred career" groups changed their career plans more frequently than those planning to go into careers immediately. This expectation could be justified on the grounds that women in these two groups have to adjust their plans more frequently than the others in order to find workable solutions to include both marriage and their initial (precollege) career ambitions. Table 7 shows, however, that this result did not occur. About 53 percent in each group had only one career choice, and about 37 percent in each group had two. Only five of the 874 women for whom information was available indicated that they did not have at least one career choice after entering college.

Only 37 of 870 said they would choose a different career field if they had to do it over again. Whereas 11 percent of the "uncertain" women said they would change, the percentages in the other four groups that said "yes" ranged from 2 to 4 percent.

Table 7

Percentage of Women Scholars with Various Marriage and/or Career Plans Who Have Made Different Numbers of Career Choices

Number of Career Choices	Plans				
	Marriage Only	Marriage & Deferred Career	Marriage & Immediate Career	Career Only	Uncertain
None	--	0.7	0.2	2.0	1.9
1	51.3	55.7	51.4	56.9	47.2
2	42.1	36.3	37.3	33.3	37.7
3	5.3	6.3	10.6	7.8	13.2
4	1.3	0.7	0.5	--	--
5	--	0.3	--	--	--
Total N	76	287	407	51	53

Problems Encountered in Making and Implementing Plans

The results presented above suggest that both the level of education sought and the type of career planned are related to the marriage and career plans of these highly intelligent women. Although it is impossible to determine from these data the extent to which marriage and career plans affected the career fields selected, an attempt was made to determine some of the major problems encountered in making and implementing their plans.

Of those who sought a "career only," 98 percent expressed no major problems; 91 percent with "marriage only" plans indicated no major problems. On the other hand, 78 percent, 82 percent, and 84 percent in the "marriage with deferred career," "uncertain," and "marriage with immediate career" groups, respectively, indicated no problems. Thus, those who made definite decisions regarding marriage or career were more likely to have expressed no problems.

As shown in Table 8, the most frequent problem (12.2 percent) expressed by women planning marriage with deferred careers was one of being pulled in too many directions. One may be surprised that more of them did not express this problem. However, it is incorrect to assume that, with no family obligations, most of these women would have begun their careers immediately; note from Table 2 that 48 percent of them had no children.

Table 8

Percentages of Women Scholars who Expressed having Experienced these Major Problems in Carrying Out their Marriage and/or Career Plans

	Plans				
Major Problems	Marriage Only	Marriage & Deferred Career	Marriage & Immediate Career	Career Only	Uncertain
Not aiming high enough	--	1.0	--	--	
Difficulty finding mate	--	0.3	3.2	1.9	10.9
Husband's job location	1.3	2.8	2.9	--	--
Decreased career ambition	5.3	1.7	0.7	--	--
Frustration--pulled in many directions	2.6	12.2	3.2	--	3.7
Lack part time employment	--	0.3	2.0	--	--
Unfair competition with males	--	0.7	1.4	--	1.8
Keeping up with field	--	3.5	1.7	--	--
Total N	76	289	410	53	55

The most frequent problem expressed by women uncertain about their plans was one of difficulty finding a mate.

Problems Experienced Because of Being a Woman

Many more women, regardless of their plans, expressed problems related to their gender than expressed problems that interferred with making and implementing their plans.

Table 9

Percentages of Women Scholars with Various Marriage and/or Career Plans Who Expressed Having Encountered These Problems Because of Being Female

	Plans				
Major Problems	Marriage Only	Marriage & Deferred Career	Marriage & Immediate Career	Career Only	Uncertain
Discrimination because of sex	14.5	12.8	22.9	13.2	21.8
Internal Conflict	1.3	4.8	7.3	--	10.9
Insufficient time	7.9	10.7	5.4	--	3.6
Total N	76	289	410	53	55

As Table 9 shows, the problem of discrimination was cited most frequently by women in each of the five groups. Interestingly, women who were "uncertain" or who wanted marriage with an immediate career expressed this problem proportionally more frequently than women in the other groups.

Women composing the "career only" group were least likely to express major problems related to being a female. In fact, six percent reported advantages to being a woman. Only 13 percent of them revealed any problem related to being a woman, and all of these involved discrimination.

Discussion

In contrast to Terman and Oden's (1959) finding that most of the gifted women in their sample did not pursue careers, 85 percent of the women Merit Scholars who participated in this study reported that they planned a career. An important difference, however, is that the women in Terman's sample were in their mid-forties and reported actual behavior; the Merit Scholars were in their mid-twenties and reported their plans. About 52 percent of the woman Scholars reported, however, that they were either already working in their career fields or planned to begin as soon as their educational programs would permit.

A woman Scholar's actual marital status at the time of this followup was related to her career and/or marriage plans. This result is hardly surprising. It was surprising, however, that the marriage and career plans of many Scholars were apparently not strongly affected by whether or not they had children. Whereas about 50 percent of the married Scholars who planned a combination marriage-deferred career reported having no children, about one-third of the marriage-immediate career group had children in their homes. Although traditionally the "place of the young mother is in the home," many of these talented women clearly planned to depart from that tradition.

Although the Merit Scholar selection process insures considerable homogeneity on scholastic ability, it was found nevertheless that the woman Scholars who

planned to pursue a career immediately, included those planning a marriage-career combination, scored slightly higher on the SAT-Verbal and SAT-Mathematics tests than those who either planned no career or who planned to delay beginning them.

In addition to these slight ability differences, it was observed that, in general, women who planned careers sought more education than those who did not plan a career; and those who planned to begin their careers immediately wanted more education than those who planned to delay them. Thus, the career ambitions of those seeking immediate careers seem clear: they expect to waste no time getting started and they plan to enter the job market well-equipped educationally.

Although considerable shifting occurred from initial to final career choices, the intentions of these women can be seen in the "final" career fields they selected. In general, they chose high-level professions. Some interesting differences were noted, however, among those who planned a "career only" or a marriage-immediate career combination. Whereas only three of the former group chose careers in the social sciences, medicine, law, business, and education fields, almost one-fourth of the latter group selected these same fields. Almost one-half of the "career only" women were attracted by the humanities-fine arts and "other" fields. Few women said they would choose a different career if they had to make the choice over again.

Most women did not reveal major problems encountered in making and implementing their plans. Those with clear cut "marriage only" or "career only" decisions seldom spoke of major problems.

Many women felt, however, that they had encountered problems pursuing their intellectual goals because of their sex. Although discrimination because of sex was the problem mentioned most frequently, internal conflict over feminine-masculine role and insufficient time were other problems frequently expressed.

A number of women were keenly perturbed because of problems they traced directly to their sex. One described her sex-role conflict in this way:

> "I think intelligent women have a hell of a time, because they read great books and aspire to imitate great deeds of the past. The trouble is, the great books were written by men and the great deeds done by men. This is probably one of the main reasons why women never write great books or do great deeds; we're much too frustrated trying to decide whether to act like men or like women, never succeeding in doing either properly."

About six percent of the "career only" Scholars saw advantages to being a woman in pursuing their intellectual objectives. However, few of her colleagues with different plans shared this view. For example, as an afterthought, one noted sarcastically: "Oh yes, the advantage--the ladies room is seldom crowded in the math building."

Although traditionally women, even the most intelligent ones, seldom pursue professional careers, most female Scholars give every indication that they have no intention of maintaining this tradition. In addition to being very able, these women are generally highly motivated to excel, and they have been given the financial assistance they needed to achieve a college education. Perhaps these are some of the reasons they reject the typical feminine role. How successful they will be in fulfilling their ambitions of course remains to be seen.

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